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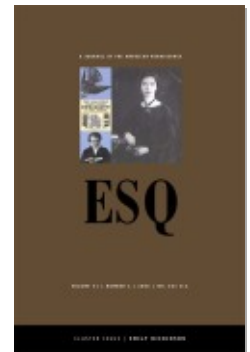
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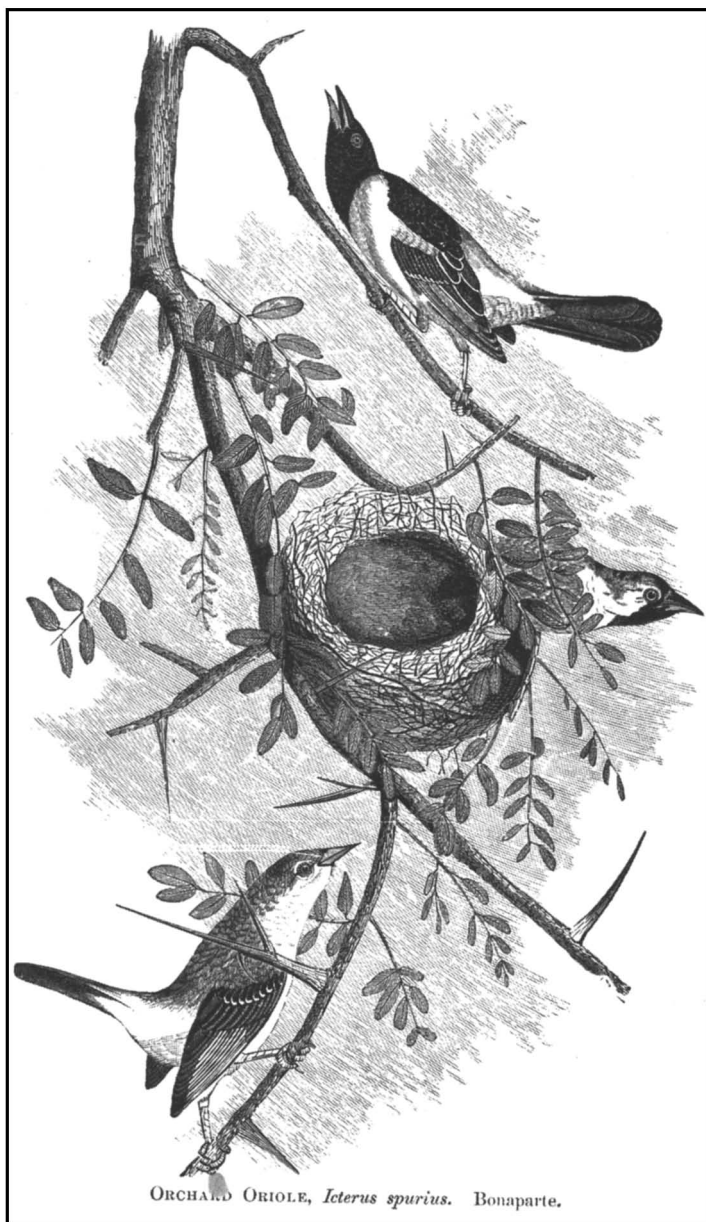
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ORCHARD ORIOLE, *Icterus spurius*. Bonaparte.

Orchard oriole. From Edward A. Samuels, *Ornithology and Oölogy of New England* . . . (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1867).

The Signifying Spinster: How Emily Dickinson Found Her Voice

DANIEL L. MANHEIM

Critics writing on Emily Dickinson have often attempted to track her sources, locating her in this or that tradition, and it has occasionally been observed that she approached her predecessors with a sense of rivalry or an inclination to satire. More than three decades ago, Ruth Miller noted that, "when [Dickinson] reads something that is printed, she pits her skill against that which has won the public stamp of approval, she does it over, leaving it, as she thinks, with a finer finish, a greater relevance." Miller proposed numerous "borrowings," but did little to address the significance of specific transformations or their place in the evolution of the poet. It is a little unclear what Dickinson herself meant when she claimed that she would "never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person." Her uses of hymnody, and, to a lesser extent, her manipulations of biblical texts, have long been discussed, and more recent critics have treated Dickinson's sources less as rival voices to be defeated than as "catalysts to release [her] distinctive voice and vision."¹

Indeed, fitting Dickinson into nineteenth-century literature, particularly literature by women, has been a prominent area of scholarship. Since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's study of Dickinson as a poet who absorbed the characters of nineteenth-century women writers into her work (and the figures of her own fictions into her life) in order to recreate herself as an emblem of the woman artist, a number of critics have

sought to examine Dickinson's poetry in the light of both her canonical and her noncanonical contemporaries. Several have followed Gilbert and Gubar in locating Dickinson among the major female authors of Victorian England. Elizabeth Phillips examines how "the poems are often transformations of episodes in the lives of . . . literary characters, and historical figures"; she thus hears in the poems voices inspired by a number of writers, especially Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Focusing on metaphor rather than voice, Wendy Barker, in her consideration of Dickinson's complicated attitudes toward light as an image of male power and creative authority, sees Dickinson allying herself with the same authors; but rather than quarrying them for sources of histrionic expostulation, Barker's Dickinson allies herself with sisters who, like herself, were "nurtured in the Dark."²

More pertinent to my purposes in this essay are works that locate Dickinson's sources in more popular contemporary works. Cheryl Walker and Joanne Dobson see Dickinson as very much of her time and place, "steeped," as Dobson writes, "in the literary conventions of a community of expression that encouraged women to write while insisting that they remain, in essence, silent." David Reynolds considers certain poems as examples of what *Springfield Republican* editor Samuel Bowles called "the literature of misery." All three, in one way or another, see Dickinson's poems as a sort of culmination of the expressive imagery that developed among women forced to speak "obliquely" in order to address experiences otherwise barred from public expression. Barton St. Armand and Elizabeth Petrino consider the poet's culture even more broadly, finding Dickinson sources not only in popular literature but also in lithographs, gift books, sermons, epitaphs, visual artworks, and other cultural productions. Both critics see Dickinson at once "absorb[ing] the conventions of nineteenth-century American women's writing" and going beyond them for her own more idiosyncratic purposes.³

The primary difference between these studies of other writers important to Dickinson and what will be presented here is that this essay finds her more competitively engaged with other authors—an engagement that is not merely incidental but es-

sential to the emergence of the voice readers recognize as distinctively Dickinson's. Her efforts to go beyond other works are similar to the sort of literary revision that Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers to as "signifying." "Signifying," which Gates defines as the fundamental move in African American literary history, involves critical parody through repetition and difference. In Gates's usage, "Signifyin[g]" turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified." In other words, it is a discourse whose context is a way of writing rather than something existing in the world of the writer. Cynthia Griffin Wolff is one of many critics to note that uncertainties regarding "context and subject are at the very center of any serious investigation of Dickinson's work." In Gates's model, revision is context. Poems arising out of an antecedent work do not describe a real or imagined world, whose rules and features we must discern, but instead exist in the shape and texture of the revision itself. Of recent Dickinson critics, the one to consider her literary antecedents in a sense closest to Gates's is Mary Loeffelholz, for whom literary appropriation involves "a fierce contest over the boundaries of power and identity." Gates distinguishes between "motivated and unmotivated Signifyin[g]"—parody and pastiche. Dickinson uses both in her work, but primarily the device of parody, literary refutation—what Ralph Ellison calls "*a technical assault against the styles which have gone before.*" The "motive" of such an assault is, of course, "to create a new narrative space" for representing one's own experience. Dickinson, in order to represent her own experience, had to clear her literary voice of some of the styles that had gone before.⁴



Intimations of the signifying impulse appear early in Dickinson's writing. In a letter of 9 October 1851 to Susan Gilbert, she remarks in somewhat conventional terms on the arrival of Longfellow's *Golden Legend* at a local bookshop: "It always makes me think of 'Pegasus in the pound' — when I find a gracious author sitting side by side with 'Murray' and 'Wells' and 'Walker.' . . . I half expect to hear that they have '*flown*' some morn-

ing and in their native ether revel all the day." Dickinson read the poetry and fiction of America's most popular poet and quoted him in her letters; thus the tone of adulation is not surprising. The rest of the passage from this letter, however, is more obscure: "for our sakes dear Susie, who please ourselves with the fancy that we are the only poets, and everyone else is *prose*, let us hope they will yet be willing to share our humble world and feed upon such aliment as *we* consent to do!" (*Letters*, 144). Obviously, she is comparing the position of herself and Susan in pedestrian Amherst to that of Longfellow among Lindley Murray and the other "compilers of language texts" (*Letters*, 145n). By alluding to Longfellow's poem about Pegasus, the "Proem," or preface, to an anthology he had edited, she may even be suggesting her dream of being similarly anthologized. Yet the desire to bring the lofty Longfellow down into the "humble world" where he must grub among the prosaic suggests that amid the playfulness of the letter there is a touch of rivalry. Longfellow represents for her not just a good poet. After his death he was said to be "the American author most quoted without the label of his name," and his reputation and commercial success were already well established by the 1850s. In other words, Dickinson could have seen him as a sort of high-water mark of American poetic achievement. If he is mired in the quotidian with Amherst's sole two poets, then they themselves are well launched.⁵

Another fanciful version of the same impulse to rival lofty poets as a means of elevating herself and Sue appears in a letter written six months later. Speculating about the likelihood of her and Susan's ever marrying, she says: "When I see the Popes and the Polloks, and the John-Milton Browns, I think we are *liable*, but I dont know! I am glad there's a big *future* waiting for me and you" (*Letters*, 195). Why, one must inevitably ask, does she caricature potential suitors with names styled to evoke famous authors? Since many of the young Amherst students she knew wrote some poetry, this could simply allude to parodic names she and Sue had given them (George Gould as Alexander Pope, and so on). The following line, however, suggests that there are deeper waters here. The "big *future*" waiting for them certainly cannot mean marriage to any of these balloons; it

must be their future celebrity as poets. In other words, the promise of poetic achievement allays Dickinson's anxiety about marriage, and the fact that the gaggle of grooms are posed as poets themselves suggests that famous poets and ordinary suitors constituted to her mind a more or less equivalent threat to her own promise of achievement.

Thus Dickinson's attraction to *Kavanagh*, Longfellow's romantic novel about marriage and poetry, is scarcely surprising. That Dickinson and those close to her avidly read the novel has been widely noted.⁶ One plot line of possible interest to Dickinson involves a village schoolmaster, Churchill, who has the heart and the talent to be a poet but is too caught up in daily affairs and family obligations ever to write the great work he feels is in him. At the end of the novel, Churchill acknowledges his failure, but insists that in every house should appear the inspirational words of "a certain poet":

Stay, stay the present instant!
 Imprint the marks of wisdom on its wings!
 Oh, let it not elude thy grasp, but like
 The good old patriarch upon record,
 Hold the fleet angel fast until he bless thee!

The figure of the artist as wrestling Jacob gripped Dickinson until the end of her life, and could well have first struck her in reading *Kavanagh*; certainly the spectre of this unachieving poet must have served as a caution and caused further misgivings about any domestic situation that might prevent her from imprinting her marks.⁷

It is, however, the romance plot of Longfellow's novel that at this point engaged Dickinson enough to be quoted and echoed in her letters. Two of the central characters, as has been repeatedly remarked, seem loosely suggestive of Emily and Susan: Alice Archer, "a fair, delicate girl, whose whole life had been saddened by a too sensitive organization," and Alice's more confident, boisterous, outgoing friend Cecelia Vaughan.⁸ It is not necessary to rehearse here the ways in which the rhetoric of Dickinson's early letters to Susan evoke the sentimental dialog between Alice and Cecilia. Emily's affection for Susan

was powerful, at times almost destabilizing for her, and for a time, the language of sentimental fiction seemed to her appropriate to her need for expression. A letter of late April 1852, for example, opens with a lyrical and sensuous expression of longing in terms that could come from Longfellow's novel:

So sweet and still, and Thee, Oh Susie, what
need I more, to make my heaven whole?

Sweet Hour, blessed Hour, to carry me to
you, and to bring you back to me, long enough
to snatch one kiss, and whisper Good bye,
again. (*Letters*, 201)

In effect, *Kavanaugh* and similar sentimental romances furnished a language and model of experience through which Dickinson could accommodate and express her feelings for Susan. Suzanne Juhasz has pointed out that her mannered letters were in one dimension a means of "expanding the possibilities of getting what she wanted from the relationship."⁹ Figuring herself and Sue into the plausibly imagined world of sentimental fiction enabled her to construct her relationship with Sue in terms answerable to the ardency of her affection.¹⁰

Longfellow sees Alice and Cecelia's idyllic romance, their "manifold secrets" and "impassioned letters," as merely "a rehearsal in girlhood of the great drama of woman's life."¹¹ On the contrary, marriage was for Dickinson inimical to the romance. As Sue's relationship with Austin grew more serious, Emily began to interpret the "great drama" as more of a threat, both to her relationship with Sue and to their development as artists. Her most frequently cited remarks on marriage come in a letter to Sue from 1852 (*Letters*, 209–10).¹² In this letter, love, sex, men, and marriage are all equivalently fearsome because all entail physical, emotional, or psychological submission, a submission all the more troubling because it is to something desired. Love is figured as annihilation, as immolation of self in desire. True, Dickinson first brings up the topic to marvel at the notion that she may one day be expected to "lie still and be happy"; but what follows suggests that for her at this point (or for Sue, in Emily's imagination) it was not sim-

ply a question of having to close her eyes and think of Amherst. The first few lines of her extended metaphor of the wife present a picture of a woman browbeaten by some overbearing husband:

You have seen flowers at morning, *satisfied* with
the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon
with their heads bowed in anguish before the
mighty sun.

However, it quickly becomes apparent that the bowing of the head is not exactly a result of fear or dismay:

Think you these thirsty blossoms will *now* need
naught but — *dew*? No, they will cry for sun-
light, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it
scorches them, scathes them; they have got
through with peace — they know that the man
of noon, is *mightier* than the morning and their
life is henceforth to him. Oh, Susie, it is dan-
gerous, and it is all too dear, these simple trust-
ing spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we
cannot resist!

The fancied bowing of the head seems to be a result of the inadequacy of the aliment that had hitherto sustained the little flower. Marianne Noble notes that "in the masochistic sensibility generated by the convergence of [evangelical and sentimental] discourses lie possibilities for powerful forms of aesthetic representation," and indeed, Dickinson would later quarry the flower/sun relation for imaginative experiences of the sublime in many poems.¹³ Here, however, the masochistic representation measures the distance between the intensity of being subsumed and the fragile sustenance of the "dew" that prefigured it. Her emphasis is as much on innocent early delight as on sublime masochistic rapture.

Using dew as a figure for the sweetness, evanescence, and eventual loss of friendship goes back at least as far as an August 1851 letter to Abiah Root, where Dickinson quotes a line from Hosea (6:4 and 13:3) to the effect that "the 'morning cloud

and the early dew' are not more evanescent" than her friends (*Letters*, 129). Like the prophet, she would goad forth a more robust, steadfast love. In the letter to Sue, on the other hand, she seems to be wishing her friend could be satisfied with their dewy intercourse, even though she fears it must inevitably vanish. Not for several years would propinquity to the sun begin to produce "powerful forms of aesthetic representation." Here, as yet, she counterposes the evanescent, sentimental affection against the fierce assumption of an overwhelmingly oppressive mixture of desire and inevitability, and sounds desperate to retain her threatened innocence. In this comparison, girlhood intimacy and the modes of expression associated with it offer thin resistance to the threatened loss of autonomy that the "man of noon" represents.

Through her correspondence with Sue—a correspondence that would become problematic if either were to release her resistance to one of the "spirits mightier"—the young Dickinson cultivated an image of who she was, what her passions felt like, how she weighed the pleasures of this life against the demands of an afterlife, and how the texture of her experience of the world could be fitly rendered in prose. Self-assertion, self-expression, and independence came to be bound up with the maintenance of this passionate friendship: the letters to Sue show Dickinson in an early act of self-discovery, and the fact that her artistic identity comes through subscription to the rhetoric of other writers does not initially seem to trouble her. To enter the universe of their expression was to enter the "native ether" that was the rightful province of poets. However, the prospect of marriage revealed the insubstantiality of that identity, of that imagined world. Thus it was inseparable for her from the notion of dependency: economic dependency on another, more powerful person, emotional dependency on the suddenly alienable object of her young affection, and most forcibly, imaginative dependency on the language of others to authorize her emotional life even as it denies the distinctiveness of that life in her very act of adopting it.

There is no telling whether or to what extent the "*wife forgotten*" letter of June 1852 (*Letters*, 210) was Dickinson's specific warning to Sue against the dangers of marrying Austin. Alfred

Habegger shows that their romance was already in full swing by summer 1852, but it is a little hard to see Austin in her depiction of the "man of noon" who is "*mightier than the morning*."¹⁴ Nevertheless, the first time she explicitly proclaims and defends her own distinct literary voice, she does so in the context of Austin and Sue's engagement. Emily has read a poem that Austin wrote, and she chides him for his attempt to usurp her rightful province:

And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm.
Out of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough "to
him," and just say to those "nine muses" that
we have done with them!

Raised a living muse ourselves, worth the
whole nine of them. Up, off, tramp!

Now Brother Pegasus, I'll tell you what it is
— I've been in the habit *myself* of writing some
few things, and it rather appears to me that
you're getting away my patent, so you'd better
be somewhat careful, or I'll call the police! (*Let-
ters*, 235)

That Dickinson's father praised the least message that Austin wrote but slighted his daughter's literary interests is well known; but rather than expressing literary envy, this letter, bizarrely enough, is what she has to offer in the way of *congratulation*. Paula Bennett notes the ambivalence of the letter, and its deep reliance on codes and private references; she also notes the explicit rivalry. The tone of the letter, however, is not exactly "bitter and cynical" or fraught with "barely suppressed rage"; amid the ambivalence, confusion, affection, and envy, there emerges a manic pleasure.¹⁵ In Emily's letters to Susan during the two previous months, she had fought against decreasing plausibility to retain the imagined world created in the discourse she had adapted from popular fiction. Now, since there was no longer any way of easily assimilating herself to the sentimental imagery that had served her so well in the past, she had to forge a counternarrative in terms and arrangements of her own invention.

Referring to Austin and Susan in religious language probably began some time during their clandestine courtship, but here Dickinson's figures are at once at their most concentrated and most wildly allusive. The "psalm" surely refers to some poem that Austin has composed for his fiancée (the Gilberts and Dickinsons commonly shared correspondence), and there are similar metaphors for the engagement itself: "really had my doubts about your reaching Canaan." She makes sly and somewhat envious allusions to intimate contact—"hope you have enjoyed the Sabbath, and sanctuary privileges"—as well as cautionary remarks of unconvincing sobriety regarding the moral stamina that the engagement promises to require, recommending "'Pilgrim's Progress,' and 'Baxter upon the will'" (*Letters*, 234). She figures him, somewhat unkindly, as the brutish Oliver from *As You Like It*, and thinly masks her discomfort in dialect humor. Dense, at times scarcely comprehensible, the letter is above all a demonstration of what she can do when she gets her hands on an opportunity for figurative discourse—a quite formidable demonstration to any recipient who happens to fancy himself a nascent poet.

Thus her own rejection of—I am tempted to say expulsion from—sentimental discourse comes, appropriately enough, at the expense of regrettably lost verses by Austin that, given the "bloviation" of his correspondence, probably employed some of the same kinds of lyricism that she was suppressing in herself.¹⁶ The three often shared one another's letters—the whole Dickinson family was in the habit of doing so—and Emily would by this point have seen some of Austin's effusions to Sue in his letters to her. A poem, however, was another matter. After all, Emily and Sue were the "only poets" of the village. Moreover, if Austin could have Sue for a psalm, he would not only threaten to take away his sister's most beloved companion; he would threaten the friendship that had drawn forth her strongest writing so far, thereby interfering with the means of defining her emotions, thoughts, and attachments. Better to lose Sue to the Man of Noon than to a rival epistolary poet. Her only recourse was to write a response that by its sheer imaginative vitality defeats the upstart at every turn.¹⁷

A letter written to Sue in late January 1855, while she and Austin were visiting her relatives in Michigan, seems to confirm that Emily sought to convert the apparent loss of their intimacy into imaginative power. The letter begins with some of the most ardently affectionate and toweringly sentimental language Dickinson ever wrote to her friend:

I miss you, mourn for you, and walk the
Streets alone — often at night, beside, I fall
asleep in tears, for your dear face, yet not one
word comes back to me from that silent West.
If it is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid
to my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love
in; but if it *lives and beats* still, still lives and beats
for me, then say me so, and I will strike the strings
to one more strain of happiness before I die.
(*Letters*, 315)

She seems to be trying to take the sentimental language she derived from Longfellow and others as far as it can go. As Dickinson proceeds, however, sentimentalism gives way to a quite different tone. Imagining their reunion, she compares herself to Sue's best friend from childhood, "Sweet Kate Scott." A prior friendship is always a threat, and while Catherine and Emily subsequently grew close, here one hears Emily's competing with an anteceding intimate whose virtues of expression Sue had apparently extolled at length:

I take the words of that Sweet Kate Scott, I have
never seen — and say "it is too blissful." I never
will be "so busy" when you get back to me, as I
used to be. I'll get "my spinning done," for
Susie, it steals over me once in a while, that as
fingers fly and I am so busy, a far more won-
drous Shuttle shifts the subtler thread, and
when *that's* web is spun, *indeed my* spinning will
be done. I think with you, dear Susie, and Mat
by me again, I shall be still for joy. I shall not
fret or murmur — shall not care when the wind

blows, shall not observe the storm — “Such, and so precious” are you. (*Letters*, 315)

The signifying spinster. One pictures Sue showing a letter from Kate to Emily and saying how sweet her friend is and how affectionate, and how devoted to want to get all her domestic chores done in preparation for Sue’s visit. Dickinson “takes the words” of that rival and shows what ought rightly to be done with them. Converting the homely art of spinning into a figure for the fabrication of a life may be an ancient trope, and Dickinson would later, of course, write much more subtly about the spider’s domestic artisanship. All she suggests at this point is that once her spinning is done—once she and her friends are in Heaven—they will be fully restored to her intimate possession. There remains a certain Longfellowish wistfulness here; yet in a milder and more controlled way than in the “Out of the way, Pegasus” letter to Austin, sentiment is displaced by wit—and by the thrill of a triumph over the rival: a triumph of superior invention. It is as if restoration of intimacy accompanies the very act of conceiving the trope.

The first full poem, by the manuscript reckoning, in which Dickinson seems to be using language as a “springboard of immense compensatory energy,” comes in an elusive letter to Sue from roughly the same period.¹⁸ The divergent readings of the variously dated “Sue — you can go or stay — ” letter make it almost notorious. For Sewall it confirms a “break that was by then inevitable” and marks “the nearest approach to surliness and dismissal of any [letters] that survive.” Martha Nell Smith, while acknowledging the evident quarrel over some religious matter, argues that the letter is full of deliberately “ludicrous juxtapositions” that show how she is “determined not to let differences with loved ones defeat her into sourness” and even “to charm her friend across the emotional distance that has apparently developed between them.”¹⁹ Considering the poem that accompanies (and perhaps amplifies) the letter, “I have a Bird in spring” (*Letters*, 306–7; F4/J5), may open an alternative to such divergent interpretations.

The bird that indicates some metaphysical blessing is conventional, but for Dickinson the figure had a more immediate

source. A letter to Abiah Root, written in October 1848, contains one of Dickinson's more plaintive passages of recrimination for someone's real or imagined neglect: "At our Holyoke Anniversary, I caught one glimpse of your face, & fondly anticipated an interview with you, & a reason for your silence, but when I thought to find you search was vain, for 'the bird had flown'" (*Letters*, 71). The figure recurs in her letters of the next six or seven years, once to Austin, several times to Susan, always in a context indicating frustration over the absence of someone she loves. As Miriam Baker Finkelstein showed years ago in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, the line in the letter to Abiah comes from a poem by Corolla H. Bennet and a subsequent imitation by Fanny Forester, both published in *Godey's Lady's Book* earlier in the same year. Bennet's poem, "The Consumptive," appearing in May 1848, tells of a wasting girl staring out a casement window in anticipation of her death. At one point a bird warbles to her its "soft, melodious song," but the next time she looks up, she finds that "The bird ha[s] flown"; as she makes this discovery, her "spirit . . . mount[s] to the skies."²⁰ Even as this poem began to be imitated and quarried for lines and images by others seeking publication in *Godey's*, *Graham's Monthly*, and other magazines, Dickinson was finding in it apt material for expressing her emotional ties. The brief quotation thus became a shorthand allusion to a familiar conceit. Just as she could quote passages of the Bible to allude to a recognizable and appropriate homilistic lesson, she could quote snippets of poetry to evoke the feelings conjured by the poem in which they appear.

At first those snippets are apparently suited to what she wants to express in her letters to Abiah and others. By the time of the "Sue — you can go or stay —" letter, however, she no longer feels that the language popular among the magazine poets is adequate to the complexity of her emotional and metaphysical understanding of her experience. She must reinvent the tropes on her own, beginning with an explicit revision and transcendence of the materials of the earlier tradition. Finkelstein presents three poems as constituting the bird paradigm on which "I have a Bird in spring" draws, though there may have been more: in Bennet's "Consumptive," a real bird's disappearance

makes a sickly girl long for the skies; in Forester's revision the bird is a visitor from paradise; in the third version, written by Mrs. E. W. Caswell expressly in homage to Forester's poem but titled in direct allusion to Bennet's ("My Bird Has Flown"—see the appendix below), the feathery daemon becomes a figure for a little girl's soul. Each revision, in other words, pays homage to the previous iterations, but uses the figure slightly differently: as a reminder of things beyond the material world, as a piece of paradise, as a symbolic substitute for an actual person. Dickinson transcends all three uses: she signifies on the antecedent popular texts in order to signal her invention of a space and a voice that make it immaterial whether Sue should "go or stay."

The bird paradigm is first evoked explicitly in the second stanza, where "that Bird of mine / Though flown" echoes the Bennet line repeated by Caswell. There is an indication, however, that the paradigm may be overturned: unlike the magazine birds, Dickinson's bird seems still to belong in the earthly realm, and goes "beyond the sea" only to learn a more beautiful music with which to delight the speaker. Yet this innocent assurance is complicated in the third and fourth stanzas, where the certainty of the bird's return is questioned. In the last lines of the third stanza—"though they now depart, / Tell I my doubting heart / They're thine"—the speaker seems to reassure her heart that the things it has lost still belong to it. But it is a little unclear what things she refers to. *What* is "Fast in a safer hand / Held in a truer Land"? Her loved ones? Her hands? Her birds? The ambiguity may be at least partially removed, however, if we read the poem not as an attachment to the letter but as an amplification of it.²¹ The somewhat morbidly melodramatic final paragraph of the letter seems to refer back to Dickinson's discussion three paragraphs earlier of how often she has lost the "things I fancy I have loved":

Few have been given me, and if I love them
so, that for *idolatry*, they are removed from me
— I simply murmur *gone*, and the billow dies away
into the boundless blue, and no one knows but
me, that one went down today. (*Letters*, 305–6)

The letter alludes to some unnamed quarrel, but its general subject is loss and her strategies for coping with it. The third stanza, then, makes more sense as referring to these "Few" who end up in the "boundless blue," just as the otherwise antecedentless "mine" are "Held in a truer Land." When Dickinson nevertheless assures her "doubting heart" that these "things I fancy I have loved" are still "thine," she may not be simply re-asserting that her bird will return from beyond the sea. Rather, held by the imaginative power of her "idolatry," the things she loves remain hers even once the material occasion of her first possessing them has vanished.

In the "bird has flown" paradigm, the flight of a bird serves as a reminder of or an encounter with shadier bowers and brighter skies than can generally be known in mottled lives. Dickinson's letter incorporates this model insofar as the loss of her material fancies is compensated by retaining the imaginative delights they have inspired. Accordingly, in the poem's fourth stanza, Dickinson sees how a "serener Bright" and "more golden light" can dispel the "doubt and fear" and "discord" that inevitably mar attachment in the material world. Even though she has lost Susan, not to "the grave" or even exactly to "an oblivion rather bitterer than [*sic*?] death" (*Letters*, 305), the letter nevertheless emphasizes her loss of material, physical immediacy. The bird's flight to a realm that is "serener" and "more golden" suggests that Susan's eclipse will yield a kind of immaterial exchange that will necessarily be purer than whatever transpires as events of daily life. In other words, Dickinson uses the paradigm of the departing bird to create a space independent of any vicissitudes that could loosen her hold on the things she fancies she has loved.

In each of the three magazine poems, the bird, once flown, never comes back, but points out a sublimer realm of "shadier bowers," "serener airs," and "purer love." Dickinson creates a possibility for the speaker to retain the inspiration of the sublimer realm that is the center of the poem's conceit even as it loses the bird itself. Sewall and Smith, despite widely divergent views regarding this letter, concur in insisting that Dickinson's poem says the bird is bound to return from its "serener Bright";²² however, the poem says no such thing. The

second stanza does indeed assert that the robin, having learned "melody new, . . . will return," and the same lines appear in an untroubled November 1854 letter to the Hollands, indicating an impatient but optimistic desire for another visit from her friends (*Letters*, 310). The last stanza of the version to Sue, however, repeats the figure and language of stanza 2, but with a difference. The substitution of "Shall in a distant tree" for "Learneth beyond the sea" indicates that the bird remains distant, but confers instead something greater than its presence: "Bright melody." The word "Return" becomes transitive, indicating not where the distant bird will go, but what it will do with the "Bright melody": send it back. Like her predecessors, Dickinson imagines the bird as having passed on to a sublimer realm, a "serener Bright," but returning, in allusion to Caswell's possibly unintentional pun, "serener airs" than can be sung in the immediate presence of the bird-watcher. The syntax, moreover, leaves it uncertain who is producing the melodies: "Shall in a distant tree / Bright melody for me / Return." It is equally plausible to read this as indicating that the bird's having flown will give rise to "Bright melody" in the one who waits behind: like Whitman's abandoned mocking bird, the watcher produces melody out of longing. By means of the ambiguous syntax, the melody becomes mutual, arising simultaneously in both singers. Sue's removal to where Emily will have access to her only in the "serener Bright" of her imagination, where she can recreate the intensity of their intimacy at will without the "doubt and fear" and "discord" that sometimes interrupted their early correspondence—this removal will prove a source of creative energy.²³

Back in 1851, in her letter to Sue about Longfellow's *Golden Legend*, Dickinson had written of her fear: "I half expect to hear [the 'gracious author(s)'] have *'flown'* some morning and in their native ether revel all the day" (*Letters*, 144; italics and quotation marks in original). Even this early, the place to which "the bird has flown" is the place of poetry and poetic inspiration. Sue's removal gives Emily a way she can always go to that site of inspiration. By invoking, in "I have a Bird in spring," the rhetorical figures of a number of currently popular poets and then transcending them, she at once places herself in their com-

pany and demonstrates that she no longer relies on them to describe her experience and her consciousness. Thus the letter in which the poem appears is neither bitter, nor melancholy, nor ludicrous. In the last line of the prose portion of the letter, she writes, "We have walked very pleasantly – Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge – then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on" (*Letters*, 306). There are numerous possible symbolic associations she might have had in mind for the "distant hill," but her writing the last clause in the patient, artfully measured feet of iambic pentameter seems to imply that her journey will take her in the difficult, figurative direction of poetic invention: from there on, her letter issues into the poem itself.

There is no deciding when Emily Dickinson became a poet in fact rather than fancy. Her early valentines seem to have been composed to amuse her brother and his friends, and she mentions having written "some few things" in her 27 March 1853 letter to Austin. That she could have remarked even playfully that she and Sue were Amherst's poets suggests that they must already have shared some compositions. Her revision of the 1848 bird threnodies could even be taken as indicating that Dickinson was already writing poetry at Mount Holyoke.²⁴ On the other hand, the recurrent repetition of such lines as "The bird had flown," or passages from Longfellow's "The Rainy Day" or *Kavanagh*, would suggest that for a long time, while she and Sue plainly wrote occasional verses, the language of the popular literature of her day answered, successfully if uneasily, to the emotional experience of her encounters with the people whose affection she sought. With this letter, she announces a transformation in her relations with Sue—a transformation that would only slowly be realized. The letter marks not an emotional break but a discursive one. Juhasz asserts that "Dickinson . . . wanted to perpetuate her particular relationship with Sue, a relationship which in real life would certainly have had to alter as Sue moved from best friend to sister-in-law, and . . . to perpetuate as well her role as writer of love letters"; thus "Sue became the agent by which Dickinson learned to create a world" in letters.²⁵ Juhasz sees this effort to create a world developing from the earliest letters to Sue onward. If,

however, in the earlier letters she was trying rather to live within someone else's created world, then the more consequential break with the past, with the notion of an enduring intimate, exclusive relationship with a real-life Sue, came when she began to reject these imagined worlds in favor of her own superior constructions. She realized that if she wanted a language truly adequate to her emotional experience of the world, she would have to make it up herself.

Making it up herself, however, involved signifying on the antecedent tradition: going where others had gone before, then going beyond, to depict explicitly her encountering and surpassing the most extravagant expressions of emotion available to her in the conventional discourses of her world, biblical as well as popular. "I spilt the dew, / But took the morn - ," she says in one encomium to Sue, possibly written in 1858 (F5/J14). Again, she had long associated dew with the sweetness and evanescence of her friendships. Here the convenient homily from Hosea about the "morning cloud and the early dew," used repeatedly in early letters, no longer serves as an adequate figure for her experience. She loses the dew, but retains, in effect, a metonymic extension of it. In other words, she transforms the loss into an Emersonian figure for the capacity of her imagination to gain a conceptual apprehension far wider than the sacrificed material circumstances that gave rise to it. It is as if in the *idea* of Sue lay the possibility of an intenser intimacy, an intenser energy, an expression truer to her feelings, than in the daily contacts at the new household at the Evergreens; and this intenser energy had to be marked in language that announced its own transcendence of the "humble world" (*Letters*, 144).

There are no letter manuscripts anywhere dated 1857 and only a few dated 1856. It is quite possible to assume that Dickinson virtually stopped writing letters, at least temporarily, and began instead to write poems, in copious amounts, to be copied into the early fascicles of 1858 and 1859. The earliest poems, however, were not being composed for any anthologist or magazine editor; thirteen of the first fifty poems in R. W. Franklin's variorum edition were addressed to Sue, and it is

possible that many more besides were sent to her before being transcribed into the fascicles. In other words, the poem supplants the letter as the vehicle for the expression of this ardent emotional attachment, and while other elements simultaneously come in to inform Dickinson's poetic style, the origins of her poetic vocation lie in the conversion of intensely sentimental language into her own more idiosyncratic and metaphysical conceits.



In several poems of the early fascicles Dickinson is quite explicit about this conversion. As Finkelstein shows, it was conventional to announce by allusive quotation the antecedent text or tradition within which one was writing; verses were thus "modeled on" one another without any sense of surpassing the prior work. When, for example, Dickinson writes an elegy (F72/J93), she tailors a published poem about the death of family friend Dr. Jacob Holt, modifying its style, but essentially following the same program of composition.²⁶ But as "I had a Bird in spring" suggests, "signifying" might be a better word than adaptation for Dickinson's transformation of her source material. The next poem in which she makes explicit allusion to popular poetry is "There's something quieter than sleep" (F62/J45). Lines 13–14 speak of "simple-hearted neighbors" who "Chat of the 'Early dead.'" Poems about dead children were of course plentiful throughout the nineteenth century, but "the early dead" became a repeated refrain in a series of poems of the 1840s, beginning, most likely, with C. Teresa Clark's "A Mother's Prayers over Her Dying Child," published in the *Ladies' Pearl* in 1842. Emily Dickinson refers directly to this sequence in "There's something quieter than sleep." The poem does more than simply "discard the clichés" of conventional poetry. It again, more forcefully and deviously, signifies on the convention in order to establish a more personal and idiosyncratic meaning—to declare the poet's own voice.²⁷

The poem at first seems to go beyond the convention by merely drifting. The oblique allusion to a corpse in the first two stanzas, from the position of a somewhat befuddled and

beriddled mourner, gives way to speculation about other surrounding mourners. What begins as an attempt to solve a riddle, in other words, turns into a remark about everyone else's apparent solution: they weep. Things take a peculiar turn as the speaker fears that the sobbing mourners threaten to "scare the quiet fairy / Back to her native wood!" What quiet fairy? What native wood? In this somewhat quaint-sounding line, Dickinson is attempting to contrive a further remove from the convention. It is unclear whether the fairy is somehow the speaker herself or perhaps the soul of the deceased. In the latter case, the "native wood" could be the heaven to which the spirit would somehow prematurely return if there is too much ambient disturbance. In other words, the human presence that they all recognize and mourn over would vanish in the welter of conventional bereavement too much predictable usage could abolish the lingering personal connection to the deceased. If this is the case, however, the tone of the lines is odd, almost ridiculous: "now, now, children, mustn't scare the soul."

In the final stanza Dickinson equates these naughty weepers with Clark and company, the authors of the "early dead" poems. They turn out to be not misbehaving children but "simple-hearted neighbors" and their weeping merely a sort of "Chat." She distinguishes her poem from their chat by saying that she and her unnamed ilk are more "prone to periphrasis." Critics call Dickinson's poems "gnomic," "compressed," and "cryptic." There's catachresis, plenty of enallage, no shortage of praecisio; but "periphrasis"? Seldom indeed does she seem to wish to use *more* words than are necessary. Periphrasis, however, refers not only to circumlocution but to substitution. The example she provides here is simply to say that "Birds have fled!" Like the authors of the "bird has flown" poems, in other words, she prefers the figure of a vanishing bird to the grim facts of putrefaction. Yet she is not merely expressing here a preference for one set of magazine poets over another. Anyone who recognizes her allusion to the "early dead" would know that those poems contain as much figurative language as the bird poem: Clark herself insists, "my Bird of Joy hath winged his way, / To those bright living streams, of which I panted." So what is the basis of the distinction between "we" and "they"?

A possible biblical allusion suggests that Dickinson's periphrasis is more complicated than may at first appear. Several of the poems in the "early dead" tradition caution against grieving so much for the dead that one forgets the suffering children seen every day. Poems such as Mary Brooks's "Weep Not for the Dead," included in Rufus Griswold's *Female Poets of America*, and E. Curtiss Hine's "Weep Not for the Departed," appearing in the April 1847 issue of the *Knickerbocker*, take their title from Jeremiah 22:10: "Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him."²⁸ The third stanza of Dickinson's poem then echoes the biblical verse, which continues, "but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country." The allusion lends a little gravity to the chiding tone of Dickinson's lines. More important, though, is the implicit suggestion that she herself is weeping not for the dead but for someone who "shall return no more." In other words, by means of the allusion to Jeremiah, she achieves a subtle migration in her subject, from a poem about death to a poem about loss. The final line of the poem, then, alludes less to the poems in which the flown birds represent death than to her own use of the trope to describe personal loss—loss of an idealized intimate friendship. Periphrasis indeed, for if the purpose of this poem is to describe how to write about one "that goeth away," then the whole referential apparatus linking the poem to the "early dead" tradition is a means of measuring the distance between the losses described in those conventional statements and the loss she feels she must surmount by writing about it.

"There's something quieter than sleep" thus reads like a poem addressed to Susan—certainly to someone with whom Dickinson shared poems, her own and others'—even though it now exists only in a fascicle manuscript. The next poem that makes such an explicit allusion to an antecedent tradition is directly addressed to Susan. However, Emily has by this point gone beyond specific evocation of their relations and concerns herself instead exclusively with poetic tradition. Wolff discusses a number of poems in which the poet attempts to describe the moment of the death of the year, the turning of everything to winter and immobility. In these poems, the end of autumn serves Dickinson's purpose of "giving artistic and especially lin-

guistic representation to loss."²⁹ The periphrastic image of the flight of the bird, in other words, has now been displaced by a metonymic time of migration and relinquishment. One of the first of these poems, "Besides the Autumn poets sing" (F123/J131), shows that, in order to represent this moment of silencing in nature Dickinson had to turn first to the accredited masters and explicitly refuse what they were trying to do. Whether or not her attention to male poets, known through bound volumes, rather than female poets, known through periodicals, marks a shift in her personal ambition is less significant than the persistent need to signify on antecedent voices in order to establish her own. Once again, such repudiation is the explicit center of the poem.

One would think, from the first line, that Dickinson refers to poems about autumn in all its fullness, a "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and so forth. There may be a shadow of Keats in her "Haze," but that mellow moment is not what William Cullen Bryant writes about in "The Death of the Flowers."³⁰ He describes the same "Autumn," the same aspects of the season, that interest her: the end of life, the stilling of the year. So in separating herself from what "poets sing" she is not distinguishing her lines from them by subject but by the manner of her singing. Dickinson's reduction seems directly to repudiate the calm, the assurance of reconciliation, and the easy equanimity of Bryant's recognition of inevitable change. What is the point, she might ask, in singing about absence and stillness in a language that is full of the beauties of what is lost? Such a tone conveys neither the truth about the disappearance of that world nor the experience of its loss.

In other words, the ostensible purpose of this poem is to assert that the established poets have done it wrong: "Gone - Mr Bryant's 'Golden Rod' - " she says. But Bryant's golden rod was *already* "gone, from upland, glade, and glen"—that was his point. So the reference seems instead to serve as a sort of declaration of independence. What is "gone" is a way of talking about the relation between a season and the consciousness that encounters it. The difference between the two poems is the difference between "Till fell the frost from the clear cold heaven, as falls the plague on men" and "Sealed are the spicy

valves - , " a difference between a mellifluous evocation that directly identifies the season's agents and a terse, indirect figuration. The former, Dickinson implies, is inadequate to describe loss: such language cannot possibly convey the sense of Bryant's claim that these days are "the saddest of the year." His poem is lavish in its description not only of what *was* (brier-rose and orchis and so forth), but even of what *is*—"the cold November rain / Calls not from out the gloomy earth the lovely ones again." A presence cannot convey an absence.

What does she give us instead? "A few incisive mornings - / A few Ascetic eves - ." If the move to the generic is bland, and even a little bit pouty, it nevertheless avoids defining something by what it no longer contains. But what is an "incisive morning"? The image seems similar to the "Slant of light" that gives "Heavenly Hurt" in her later seasonal poem (F320/J258). Each dawn surgically eliminates; what is removed is no longer mentionable. Similarly, "Ascetic eves" are characterized not by what they contain but by what they almost ritualistically and self-abnegatingly deny. The brooks and elves of the third stanza might seem to return to a more conventional way of describing the loss of the beauties of the season:

Still, is the bustle in the Brook -
Sealed are the spicy valves -
Mesmeric fingers softly touch
The eyes of many Elves -

However, Dickinson introduces these items only to explore different means of taking them away again. As one reads the first line of this stanza, one expects that "Still" will initiate some qualified compensatory gain. "Still"—for all that—"is the bustle in the Brook" . . . "gurgling merrily along," we anticipate, and it is not until the beginning of the next line that we must go back and revise the reading. We arrest the flow of the brook—and thus the flow of a conventional notion of nature's redemptiveness—in the act of reading. As in the poem just preceding this in the sixth fascicle, we are offered a delusive, momentary invitation to believe the possibility that life still exists: "Almost thy plausibility / Induces my belief" (F122/J130).

The other three lines of the stanza offer different strategies for avoiding Bryant's failure. The "spicy valves" that have been "Sealed" probably refer to the scent-producing properties of flowers. But unlike Bryant, far from invoking "the brier-rose and the orchis," or lyrically pitying the "south wind" that "searches for the flowers whose fragrance late he bore," Dickinson's synecdochic reference to "valves" would have evoked for her either a botanical function or the purely mechanical covering of a sluice. Either pole of plausible reference thwarts the conventional lyricism of the autumn Bryant sings. Likewise, the last image in the stanza, of "Mesmeric fingers" enchanting "The eyes of many Elves," while not particularly felicitous, suggests an attempt to cleanse the sentimental fancy through the introduction of the unnamed sinister, Westervelt-like mesmerist.

Bryant concludes by revealing that the poem is really an elegy for his recently deceased sister, Sarah: the death of the flowers figures a nearer, dearer loss. The conventional figure was certainly familiar to Dickinson.³¹ Again, though, her tone suggests she is uncomfortable with Bryant's easy assimilation of the woman's death to the natural cycle of the seasons. Amazingly, he finds it "not unmeet" that she "should perish with the flowers." Instead, her reading of the "meetness" of loss is to plead, "Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind - / Thy windy will to bear!" Wolff says this prayer is not "susceptible of misunderstanding."³² It may be more oblique and periphrastic, however, if there is, as would appear, still a lingering personal note—if she has not fully banished the thought, from the poem's field of reference, of her altered relations with Susan. Whereas death became an indirect figure for her experience of loss in "There's something quieter than sleep," here direct reference even to the figurative death so bluntly named by the "simple-hearted" Bryant is silenced. The poem teaches the necessity of reticence, of not naming. Instead, all direct and indirect biographical reference is extracted from the poem, and bearing the "windy will" of God alludes only to the now-objectless experience of losing things one has loved. Dickinson would later write about death, loss, and God's windy and arbitrary justice with much more power, assurance, and finesse. "Besides the

Autumn poets sing," however, offers a clarity of motive that only an imperfect poem can provide. The words for what she wants to describe already exist in the songs of the poets, but they fail to convey her experience. She must invoke their conventions and signify upon them by means of her own original conceits.



Once her apprenticeship—an apprenticeship of refused conventions—was complete, Dickinson was ready to define her creative process as a fire *ex nihilo*, all antecedent conditions banished. In the much-anthologized poem "Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat'?" (F401/J365), she once again invokes an immediately recognizable antecedent, but this time only as a vehicle to demonstrate her absolute mastery. Dickinson does not specify in this poem precisely what is being forged; however, her emphasis is not on the product but on the two different circumstances of fabrication. She contrasts "Fire's common tint" with the "unanointed Blaze" of ore that has "vanquished Flame's conditions." The sense of "anointment" here seems to be that of official consecration or divine appointment. The "anointed" soul, less hot and less pure, would presumably rely on some sort of outside ratification of its identity. As in many poems, Dickinson refers simultaneously to the eternal soul and the creative will: the purification process of vanquishing "Flame's conditions" suggests a trying of the soul, but not, since it is unanointed, in any ecclesiastical tryworks. Instead, the "finer Forge / That soundless tugs - within - " generates a finer soul than the one that would receive formal consecration. The "Refining" of the "impatient Ores" to produce "designated Light" suggests likewise the process of creative work: the soul at the "White Heat" refines its materials so thoroughly that there is no longer any contamination by alien elements or any evidence of the process of workmanship. The "designated" light that results differs from "anointed" light in that it has been marked out by the soul through its own refining process, rather than consecrated or ratified by an exterior tribunal.

So much is familiar to anyone who has studied the poem. More puzzling is the poem's structure: why does its sole nonfigurative element come in after the conceit has already been developed? The sixteen-line poem is divided into two sentences (the second closing only with a dash), each eight lines long. In the first sentence an implied auditor, someone evidently familiar with "Fire's common tint," is invited—"dared"—to witness the creation of light that has "vanquished Flame's conditions." The beginning and ending of the poem are abstract, highly figurative; they contain no common nouns that are not refined by the converting power of the poet's metaphorical sensibility. But at the beginning of the second sentence, there is a slightly startling reference to the most ordinary subject a woman of Amherst could think of—the village blacksmith. The initial reference in line 9 is quite material, quite quotidian—it indicates a real, if generic, blacksmith. Already in the next line, however, Dickinson begins to dematerialize the figure by assimilating his work to the metonymic "Anvil's even ring," which immediately in the next line begins to "Stand . . . symbol" for the now more abstractly conceptual "Forge" that she had introduced in the first sentence. In other words, the introduction of the material blacksmith allows Dickinson to provide a brief demonstration of the refining process by which the true poet is able to refine the stuff producing "Fire's common tint" into something vastly more brilliant.

What, then, does the poem imply about works that *do* glow with "Fire's common tint," that are *not* "unannointed"? The reference to the blacksmith stands in the poem for the ordinary subject of the common poem, but it is also, of course, the subject of an immensely popular poem by the most celebrated American poet of Dickinson's day—a poem already being memorized by schoolchildren while its author was still a comparatively young man. In Longfellow's "Village Blacksmith," "children coming home from school / Look in at the open door," there to see some entirely ordinary "burning sparks" ("Like chaff," Longfellow acknowledges, as if conceding the modesty of his own figure) and to hear the "roar" of the "bellows." When Dickinson dares her auditor to "crouch within

the door" of her smithy, she in effect, like some tantalizing carnival barker, invites those same children to see some forging that promises to be much more impressive. Similarly, Longfellow assures us that the ringing sound of the "heavy sledge" sounds like . . . well, a bell. The same ringing in Dickinson's poem is transformed into something that "soundless tugs"—in other words, something that *doesn't ring*. Where Longfellow had given us a simile in which resemblance comes so close to identity as to make no matter, Dickinson extracts potentially analogous, quite apt, elements from the ringing that do not have anything to do with sound—one would have thought ringing was *just sound* . . . but no, it tugs, works, urges us to invent and refine.³³

The creative process Dickinson describes, in other words, involves taking the stuff of the quotidian world, including that which is written by what we must now acknowledge to be quotidian poets, and teasing out unanticipated metaphysical possibilities. Longfellow's poem is not, however, without its metaphysical dimension. "The Village Blacksmith" closes with a touchingly modest figurative elevation in which our work on life's "sounding anvil" shapes every "deed and thought." When Dickinson invokes the "Anvil," she raises it to a height she must have felt dwarfed Longfellow's lowly platitude. His figure never departs from "Flame's conditions"—from the generic field of edification literature that produced it—and the significance he draws from it, that we must work at life in order to have a hand in shaping our fate, is a reflection that is thoroughly accredited in any tradition of homely philosophy: that is, it is "anointed" by the authority of ancient convention. To make a poem that will "Repudiate the Forge," Dickinson purges her references of all significance other than her own self-authorizing "designated Light."³⁴



"To the faithful Absence is condensed presence." This gnomic little apothegm, written to Sue around 1878 (*Letters*, 632), suggests, as do a number of other letters to Sue from the 1870s, the intensity of the sense of power that the loss of their early

intimacy engendered. Such statements—"To miss you, Sue, is power" (*Letters*, 489), "Trial as a Stimulus far exceeds Wine" (*Letters*, 532)—show to what extent personal loss was maintained as a source of invention, for such statements exemplify the invention that has "vanquished Flame's conditions" in that they seem scarcely grounded in common discourse. But in order to sustain this power of invention, Dickinson needed as well to retain the stimulus, the "springboard of immense compensatory energy," that the loss released. By the 1870s she may no longer have felt the need to signify on sentimental literature—to silence the voices that encroached on the narrative space she labored to establish—in order to define her experience. Nevertheless, she still had to reinvent the experience of absence, in order to retain the power to rise out of that absence into poetry.

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APPENDIX

"The Consumptive," by Corolla H. Bennet:

The snow on Etna's brow is pale
 But paler still was she—
 The maid that dwelt in Yino's vale,
 The fair Andromache;
 Reclining by the casement wide
 That looked o'er Grecia's bay,
 She gazed upon the waves and sighed,
 "Oh, let me pass away!"

A moss-rose in the garden grew,
 And to the casement crept;
 Unto her lips its buds she drew,

Then closed her eyes and wept;
 The whispered words none heard her say,
 That mingled with each tear—
 "Oh take me from the earth away,
 I cannot linger here!"

A bright bird warbled from above,
 His soft, melodious song;
 The maiden heard his notes of love
 The olive trees among:
 She heard, and raised her soul-bright eyes
 As softer grew each strain—
 "Oh, take me, take me to the skies,
 I cannot here remain!"

The lute she loved lay silent there
 Upon the marbled floor;
 She raised it and her fingers fair
 The sweet chords lingered o'er;
 Then slowly, sadly breathed she forth
 A melancholy lay—
 Her voice was music not of earth,
 Nor long on earth to stay.

Her song was hushed, its echoes mute,
 And silence filled the air;
 She cast aside her pensive lute
 And clasped her hands in prayer:
 "Oh Father, take my soul to Thee,
 For life is ever drear;
 Oh, make this earth-bound spirit free,
 I cannot linger here!"

Once more she looked upon the wave,
 Once more upon the sky;
 And once again a kiss she gave
 Unto the rose-buds nigh.
 The bird had flown—she saw no more,
 But gently closed her eyes—

Her spirit burst the chains it wore,
And mounted to the skies.

Godey's Lady's Book, May 1848

"My Bird Has Flown," by Mrs. E. W. Caswell:

My bird has flown, my gentle bird!
Four autumn suns gone by,
She left, to cheer our loneliness,
Her own dear native sky.

With love, the previous treasure came;
I drew her to my breast,
Gazed in her heaven-lit eye of blue,
And felt—how richly blest!

She grew in beauty day by day,
More dear each passing hour,
Until we came to feel our bird
Would never leave our bower.

The rich, wild sweetness of her song,
Rung on the morning air,
And mildly, on the evening breeze,
It told the hour of prayer.

We thought when darkness frowned above,
And wint'ry winds went by—
'T would still be summer *in our home*,
And sunshine *on our sky*.

With our own sweet minstrel ever near
No sorrow could invade;
Her song of love would cheer us still,
And bless our woodland shade.

Now, many a weary day hath passed
Since from my tearful eye

Her untaught pinion cleft the air,
And vanished in the sky.

Why has she gone? Seeks she afar
Some green isles's shadier bowers?
Some happier nest—serener airs—
And purer love than ours?

Oh not on earth! not here—not here!
Clouds veil our brightest skies,
And summer's mildest breezes,
Chill our bird of Paradise.

The treasure which we deemed our own
Was briefly lent, not given.
Our Father knew his spotless bird,
And called her home to Heaven.

Graham's Monthly Magazine, February 1849

NOTES

1. Ruth Miller, *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1968), 223; Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, August 1862, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1958), 415 (subsequent letters will be cited by page number in the body of the text); Benjamin Lease, *Emily Dickinson's Readings of Men and Books* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), 35. On hymnody, see Martha Winburn England, "Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts: Puritan Hymnodists," (1965), in *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*, ed. Paul Ferlazzo (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), 123–31; and Shira Wolosky, "Rhetoric or Not: Hymnal Tropes in Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts," *New England Quarterly* 61 (1988): 214–32. Including Richard B. Sewall's chapter on the topic in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), chap. 28), there have been a variety of general treatments of "Dickinson's reading," beginning with Jack Capps's *Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836–1886* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966). Many

- critics have likewise attempted to tie Dickinson to Renaissance, romantic, transcendentalist, and other literary traditions. That she read widely and without regard for what subsequent generations would consider canonicity is evident even from a brief survey of her letters.
2. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), chap. 16; Elizabeth Phillips, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1988), esp. chaps. 4 and 5 (quotation from p. 4); Wendy Barker, *Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1987). The last quotation is from Poem 436, in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1998); also see Poem 581, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1955). Subsequent poems will be cited in the text according to both editions: e.g., F436/J581. Where there is a discrepancy in capitalization or punctuation, Franklin's "reading edition" has been quoted.
 3. Cheryl Walker, *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), xiii; Joanne Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), 76; David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Knopf, 1988); 395 (quoting Samuel Bowles from the *Springfield Republican*, 7 July 1860); Barton St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984); Elizabeth Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America, 1820-1885* (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1998), 160.
 4. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 52, 107 (quoting Ralph Ellison), III; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988), 140; Mary Loeffelholz, *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 85.
 5. The poem about the winged horse jailed for vagrancy in "a quiet village" appears at the beginning of *The Estray: A Collection of Poems* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1847), a collection Longfellow edited partly to introduce the work of some younger poets. Also see Cecil Brown Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Twayne, 1964), 22.
 6. See Sewall, *Life*, 683-88: "Kavanagh lingered long in Emily's imagina-

tion" (687). Critics once scowled at Dickinson's attraction to the novel and others like it, but when it first appeared, Hawthorne called it "a true work of genius, if ever there was one" (quoted in Williams, *Longfellow*, 121).

7. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2000), 790. Apparently, the "certain poet" is Longfellow himself. For Wolff, wrestler Jacob is central to Dickinson's poetic and religious identity; yet Wolff omits notice of this passage (see *Dickinson*, 144–59). If Jacob was indeed such an important figure for many New England Christians during the 1840s and 1850s, then he would have been available for all sorts of imaginative uses.
8. Longfellow, *Kavanagh*, in *Poems and Other Writings*, 718.
9. Suzanne Juhasz, "Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 30 (1984): 172.
10. Lillian Faderman, who has written about the relationship between Alice and Cecilia and between Susan and Emily, shows how such expressions of affection between nineteenth-century women were an indication, quite simply and without any suggestion of abnormality, of a love affair, a relation distinct from the "duty" to find a man for economic sustenance and fulfillment of the woman's "primary function of bearing children." That the affection was stylized in no way made it artificial, either in the minds of the readers of the fiction or of the participants in the relationship. See Faderman's "Female Same-Sex Relationships in Novels by Longfellow, Holmes, and James," *New England Quarterly* 51 (1978): 309–32, esp. 316; and "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 197–225.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson was and remained the most important person in Emily Dickinson's life, but the nature of that importance has been debated. In his *Life of Emily Dickinson* Sewall first posited a sister-in-law who virtually scared Emily into her house for fifteen years (197–214), and Karl Keller, in *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), found Susan's reading of Emily "appreciative but inept" and called Susan "one of the lions who devoured [her]" (189 n. 13, 190). Subsequently, far more sympathetic images of Susan have appeared. Taking particular issue with Sewall is Martha Nell Smith, who, in *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), argues that there never was a formal rupture between the two (see esp. 129–205)—that, far from an inept

reader, Susan deserves to be considered what Smith elsewhere calls a "participatory primary audience" for Dickinson's poems ("Suppressing the Books of Susan in Emily Dickinson," in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven [Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2000], 110). In *Rowing in Eden* and in the introduction to their edition of letters Emily wrote to Susan, *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1998), Smith and Ellen Louise Hart go so far as to call her a "collaborator" (xii). Numerous critics have, like Smith, seen Sue as closely connected to Emily's creativity. See especially Hart, in "The Encoding of Homoerotic Desire: Emily Dickinson's Letters and Poems to Susan Dickinson, 1850–1886," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 9 (Autumn 1990): 251–72, who argues that Sue's influence continued on into the 1880s; and Paula Bennett, who, in *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), chaps. 1–2, sees Dickinson's choice to become a poet as a way to rise out of a depression that followed the end of intimacy with Susan. It is unnecessary, here, to speculate about the nature of the enduring friendship or the degree of influence; more to the point is how finding a different way of writing to Susan led Emily to find a way of writing poetry.

11. Longfellow, *Kavanagh*, in *Poems and Other Writings*, 720. Emily was not the only one who figured Sue in Longfellow's terms. In a letter that Emily could certainly have read, Austin had promised Sue that their marriage would be as beautiful "as Longfellow's *Kavanagh* is beautiful" (quoted in Habegger, *My Wars*, 302). In the novel, which they all shared, when Cecilia tells Alice that she is to marry the minister, she insists that the three will remain the closest of friends, but Alice insists that "both will not be equal to the one I lose" (*Kavanagh*, 776).
12. This letter has been well and frequently discussed. See especially Marianne Noble's treatment of its sources and subsequent poetic development in *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 147–52; and Barker's discussion of the image of the sun in *Lunacy of Light*, 51–55.
13. Noble, *Masochistic Pleasures*, 151.
14. Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001), 269–78.
15. See Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun*, 33–35.

16. Habegger, *My Wars*, 302.
17. Vivian Pollak says in a more general context that losing Sue "exacerbated Dickinson's sense of metaphysical homelessness" and "intensified her desire to clarify [her] ambitions in language" (*Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984], 80–81). It may be more accurate to say that she sought to convert possible loss into a more intensely and originally realized connection.
18. J. Marvin Eisenstadt, "Parental Loss and Genius," *American Psychologist* 33 (1978): 221. Eisenstadt and others have argued a connection between loss and genius.
19. Sewall, *Life*, 165; Smith, *Rowing*, 164, 165.
20. Miriam Baker Finkelstein, "Emily Dickinson and the Practice of Poetry" (PhD diss., SUNY–Stony Brook, 1970), 42–48. Full texts of Bennet's poem and of one poem inspired by it appear as an appendix. The second poem, by Fanny Forester, published just three months later and likely inspired by Bennet's, also regards a vanishing bird as a symbol of immortality. While it does not include the same line, it is so close in figure, sentiment, and time of publication that thoughts of the one would evoke thoughts of the other in the mind of a contemporary reader.
21. While this letter is not one of those that Jerome McGann, in "Emily Dickinson's Visible Language" (1993) in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Judith Farr (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 248–59, or Smith and Hart, in *Open Me Carefully*, might cite as challenging the conventional separation between prose and poetry, the fact that Dickinson included the poem in the letter and signed her name after *both* suggests that she considered the two communications to be related. Marietta Messmer, in fact, in *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 89, has advocated reading this letter as I do, "in dialogic interaction with its concluding poem."
22. Sewall, *Life*, 166; Smith, *Rowing*, 164.
23. Juhasz observes of Dickinson's letters generally, and especially of those to Sue, that "literal or physical separation promotes and provokes aesthetic union" ("Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters," 179).
24. Finkelstein made this claim in her dissertation ("Dickinson and the Practice of Poetry," 48–49). However, since Dickinson quoted in full in an 1855 letter to Mary Warner a poem written by John Pierpont in

- the early 1840s (*Letters*, 325), it seems safer to assume that the poems Dickinson liked she kept, wherever and whenever she read them.
25. Juhasz, "Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters," 181–82.
 26. Finkelstein, "Dickinson and the Practice of Poetry," 34–42.
 27. Finkelstein, "Dickinson and the Practice of Poetry," 59. Her suspicion that this is the poem called "The Early Dead" that was rejected by the Amherst College literary magazine, the *Indicator*, in 1848, is unfounded (56–57). For C. Teresa Clark's poem, "A Mother's Prayers over Her Dying Child," see *Lady's Pearl* 3 (December 1842): 151–52.
 28. Mary Brooks, "Weep Not for the Dead," in *The Female Poets of America*, ed. Rufus W. Griswold (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1854), 140; E. Curtiss Hine, "Weep Not for the Departed," *Knickerbocker; or, New York Monthly Magazine*, April 1847, 309.
 29. Wolff, *Dickinson*, 307.
 30. *Poems*, by William Cullen Bryant, *Collected and Arranged by the Author* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849), 153–54. This is the edition owned by Susan, in whose copy, Capps notes, "the margin of the 'goldenrod' stanza is . . . lined in pencil" (*Reading*, 112). The eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Thomson's 1400 Miltonic lines about "Autumn" seem to have little to do with Dickinson's poem; she probably just meant to invoke a canonical poetic song of autumn: the "sheaves" to which she alludes are in Thomson's very first line, but nowhere else does she clearly draw on him. Keats may, of course, be evoking the end of life in his imagery as well.
 31. Her earlier poem about the same season, "The Gentian weaves her fringes" (F21–23, J18), which may likewise be intertextually related to Bryant's "To the Fringed Gentian," seems to make this analogy directly—which makes me question Franklin's decision to mark the segments of the poem as three separate poems.
 32. Wolff, *Dickinson*, 311.
 33. Longfellow, "The Village Blacksmith," in *Poems and Other Writings*, 15–16. In "Becoming Longfellow: Work, Manhood, and Poetry," *American Literature* 72, (2000), Matthew Gartner points out that the "sexton ringing the village bell" is "a sacramental image that masks the relative status of the two kinds of work" (80). Longfellow's analogy may, in other words, have been a little richer than Dickinson took it to be.
 34. A lover of John Ruskin, along with Susan and Austin, Emily may have found her central image here in *Modern Painters* (London: Smith, Elder, 1856), where Ruskin distinguishes between "Creative" and "Re-

flective" poets: among the former, "the intellect . . . rises, till it is strong enough to assert its rule against . . . the utmost efforts of the passions; and the whole man stands in an iron glow, white hot, perhaps, but still strong, and in no wise evaporating" (3:163).